

The ruling Communist Party of Moldova (CPM) is popular and has good chances of succeeding in the ballot without abusing its power, even though its victory is unlikely to be as massive as the one in 2001. However, if electoral abuse on a larger scale is uncovered, widespread opposition protests may take place, but even then it is rather unlikely that the opposition should reach for power according to the "Ukrainian variant".

What are the stakes?

The parliamentary election will be held in Moldova on 6th March. Candidates contend for 101 mandates in the one-house parliament. Shortly after the ballot, the parliament will elect the next president of Moldova. The regulation under which the parliament elects the president by a qualified majority (61 out of 101 votes), enacted in 2000, has significantly increased the importance of parliamentary elections, in which the stake is in fact the entire power in the country. Presently, the Moldovan parliament and the executive are dominated by the CPM. The communists have 71 mandates, and the CPM leader Vladimir Voronin is the country's president. In the upcoming election the communist party will face two serious competitors: the Democratic Moldova coalition (DM) and the Christian-Democratic People's Party (CDPP), which staged the anti-government demonstrations that lasted for several months in the spring of 2002.

The candidates and their chances

The communists won the local elections in May 2003. The CPM garnered 48 percent of votes in the elections for City and Regional Councils, in which parties presently forming Democratic Moldova won 30 percent votes, and the CDPP - 7 percent. On 17th February two pre-election polls were published. According to a survey by the International Institute for Humanitarian and Political Studies, the CPM may hope for 48-49 percent of votes, DM for 25-26 percent, CDPP for 10-11 percent, and the Social Democratic Party of Moldova (SDPM) for 8-9 percent. According to the CIVIS analytic centre, the communists are backed by 61.1 percent of voters, DM by 20.9 percent, CDPP by 12.1 percent, and SDPM by 4.4 percent (below the electoral threshold). The remaining parties did not reach the electoral threshold in either of the polls (the threshold is 6 percent for single parties, 9 percent for blocs comprising two parties and 12 percent for blocs of three or more parties). The polls thus suggest that a victory of the communists is almost certain, although the scale of their win remains to be seen. The CPM may well win absolute majority in parliament again, but it is less likely that the communists should get a qualified majority that would enable them to elect the president single-handedly. The DM bloc will probably garner 20-30 percent of votes. Christian Democrats of the CDPP have a stable electorate and get around 8 percent of votes in successive ballots. This time their showing will probably be similar, or slightly better.

The campaign

Moldovan parties frequently resort to populist slogans in their campaigns. The CPM pledges to transform Moldova into a modern European state over the next parliamentary term. It promises a rise of salaries to US\$ 300 per month, 100 thousand new jobs, and higher pensions. Democratic Moldova claims it will create 100 thousand new jobs, increase salaries to US\$ 250-300 per month, reduce taxes, build free housing financed

from public funds for the poorest, and increase pensions. The CDPP promises to reduce poverty, create 200 thousand new jobs, and increase average salaries to EUR 250 and minimum pensions to EUR 90.

Judging by the general character of the campaign, it targets a desperate public of a society in which salaries average US\$ 71.5, pensions oscillate around US\$ 17.5, and more than half a million citizens (the total population being 4.4 million) work abroad, most of them illegally.

Moldovan democracy under communist rule

In the mid 1990s Moldova was regarded as a model example of democracy among the CIS members. When the communists came to power in 2001 certain abuses were committed, for example several Christian Democrat opposition deputies had their parliamentary privilege cancelled (this decision was subsequently repealed under international pressure), and several "disobedient" journalists were fired by the state radio and television. The public media are controlled by the ruling team, while private television channels and radio stations usually have limited reach. There is more freedom of opinion in the press market. The circulation of opposition newspapers accounts for 65 percent of the combined circulation of all Moldovan newspapers, pro-government papers accounting for 35 percent.

Will the vote be democratic?

The authorities have declared that they want a democratic, transparent and fair election. On 10th January the Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin invited the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union to send in observers. In the public media, the presence of officials running in the elections was reduced to the necessary minimum as of the beginning of the electoral campaign, i.e. 1st January.

Nevertheless, there have been reports on abuses on the part of the authorities. The CPM filed its election application even before the law on the commencement of the electoral campaign was published in the Official Journal. As a result, the communists got the tactically superior first position in the list of candidates. Members of the ruling team use "administrative resources" for the purpose of their campaigns (official transport, official telephones, and field "working visits" of high administration officials who are obviously electioneering). Opposition parties complain about police surveillance of their electoral meetings and incidents involving the police, such as the removal of CDPP's electoral banners in Ungheni, pressure on electioneers exerted by the security forces or even arrests of campaigners, as reported by the SDPM.

Finally, there is the problem of providing an effective opportunity to vote to Moldovans working abroad (the opposition's potential electorate) and to Moldovan citizens residing in the separatist Transnistria.

The West on the election

On 10th and 11th December 2004 delegates of the Venice Commission (advisory body of the Council of Europe) visited Chisinau where they evaluated the Moldovan electoral

laws as very good. On 9th February the European Union appealed to the authorities of Moldova to hold free and fair elections. The US Department of State communicated on 17th February that the abuses committed by the authorities in the course of the campaign were alarming and put the legitimacy of elections into doubt. A clash in the relations between the West and Moldova came with the protest of the communist electoral club leader Victor Stepaniuc. On 9th February Stepaniuc objected to the financing of the union of non-governmental organisations called "Coalition-2005" Civil Coalition for Free and Fair Elections by western countries and organisations. On 11th February the embassies of seven EU Member States, the US embassy and the OSCE Mission issued a statement saying that their support for Coalition 2005 was provided within the framework of pro-democracy programmes and was not meant to support any particular party.

Russia on the election

The electoral campaign has brought on a serious deterioration of Moldovan-Russian relations. In the run-up to the ballot, the government camp stepped up its anti-Russian rhetoric. What is more, contrary to Moscow's expectations, no CIS observers were invited to Moldova.

Moscow appears to be closely watching Moldova's unfolding campaign. However, since all major political forces in Moldova oppose the stationing of Russian troops in Transnistria and call for Moldova's participation in the Euro-Atlantic integration structures, Russia has very little room for manoeuvre. All it can do is try to force president Voronin to mitigate its policies where they affect Russia's interests. To this end, the Russian authorities and the media co-operating with them have been carrying out a propaganda campaign. They have repeatedly accused Moldova of violating international agreements (e.g. concerning the access of international observers to Transnistria or participation of the separatist republic's citizens in elections), and of an anti-Russia spy mania (several tens of Russian Federation citizens have been detained in Moldova in recent months). Russia has also threatened to impose economic and visa sanctions. Wordings of this kind were included in the Duma resolution passed on 18th February and in several statements by the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Does Moldova face an outbreak?

In January the Chisinau City Council allowed the CDPP's to hold rallies meant to express the public's assessment of the ballot in the central square of the city in the post-election period (7th - 22nd March). The request to hold such rallies suggests that the Christian Democrats intend to stage protests following the election, even if there are only minor cases of electoral fraud on the part of the authorities. Democratic Moldova may join the CDPP's protests. The two opposition camps are co-operating although there are some clashes in their relations.

Holding a fair election is in the best interest of the present authorities. It will deprive radical opposition of arguments justifying protests. The communists are popular and they are in a position to succeed in a fair election, even if the success is going to be less spectacular than in 2001.

Further developments will depend mostly on whether the governing camp choose to hold fully democratic elections. The opposition is intent on unsparingly pinpointing any and all abuses in the course of the ballot. It remains to be seen whether this is going to spark a widespread protest campaign after the election, although some kind of protests will certainly take place. The opposition's activities are apparently inspired by the Ukrainian and the Georgian revolution, and the events that accompanied last year's elections in Romania. Opposition journalists predict that that the "rose revolution" and "orange revolution" scenario will repeat itself on the Dniester. The ruling communists, on the other hand, maintain that the revolution has already taken place: in 2001 the CPM reached for power and dismantled the criminal oligarchic and business system. It seems that no democratic revolution of the Ukrainian or Georgian type is going to take place in Moldova. The behaviour of the communists to date suggests that they intend to adhere at least to the basic principles of democracy. The democratic system of government in Moldova functions better than it did in Ukraine under Leonid Kuchma, and much better than in Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze. On the other hand, the opposition has radicalised to some extent, and partly consolidated as two co-operating camps. The CDPP has already demonstrated its ability to stage lasting protest campaigns. Democratic Moldova has managed to unite a wide range of parties, and Serafim Urechean, one of its leaders, is a very popular politician.